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### Some of the West Bank's anger : a diary

Leila Farsakh

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# Some of the West Bank's anger : a diary

Leila Farsakh

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Saturday, September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2000

- 1 Two days of anger and I wonder how the news is spreading in the world. Living in Birzeit and having the chance to have a satellite dish, we did not stop changing from one channel to another to hear what the news are saying. The portrayal on CNN and the BBC still shocks me. They talk about clashes between two sides, not about youngsters throwing stones and an army shooting live ammunition at them, not about an anger against an occupation that persists, about the land that continues to be confiscated, about the 3,000 units of new houses built each year in settlements (excluding East Jerusalem), about an Israeli arrogance that treats Arabs like flies with no rights, no dignity, no respect.
- 2 The last two days have been quite monumental and it is very difficult to put the intensity of emotions lived and seen in a couple of words. I am here to do a fieldwork on Palestinian workers employed in Israeli settlements and inside the green line. One week only remains for me here and I need to get more interviews going. The work has already proved to be difficult the past three weeks, as people are a bit reluctant to talk about the subject.
- 3 This morning I decided to leave to a village near Nablus, 30 km from Birzeit where I come from and I am staying with my family. I met a person at the employment office in Nablus and he told me that Saturday is a good day to come to make interviews as workers are free given the Jewish holidays. I did not want to compromise this chance and I had to go. But I could not take my car, as it was yellow plated and people could think that I might be a settler, all the more that I do not cover my hair.
- 4 I thus went to Ramallah and from there took a service taxi to Nablus. I was in Ramallah by 9:30 in the morning and the town was all closed. You could only see young boys and men around. The Palestinian police was there. The situation was tense but I continued. I got into the taxi going to Nablus. The radio was transmitting old nationalistic and often sad songs by Marcel Khalîfa, Fayruz and others, songs that recall the times of the Intifâda, of

the resistance of the people, of all those who died for a life of dignity, for our right to the land, of our right to return.

- 5 The car went on driving and the news time came; the speaker only spoke of the al-Aqsâ massacre the day before where 7 people were killed and 24 people injured. The BBC reported the Israeli officer blaming the riots in Jerusalem on the Palestinian police and preachers that do everything than pray! And yet on the TV on Friday, we could see the Palestinians killed and injured, no Palestinian police and just Israeli soldiers shooting.
- 6 We finally came to the entrance of Nablus but we could not enter the city. The road was filled with fuming tires and we could see some boys around. It was 10:15 in the morning and the Israeli army was coming in their jeeps. We took the back road, and yet we could also find stones and fuming tires. The streets were empty and the shops were closed. There was a silence but the one you have before a storm.
- 7 I finally got to my interview, I finished by 12:00. A friend gave me her car so that I can go to the village standing opposite to the largest settlements in the Nablus area, a settlement called Ariel. I drove there and I was lucky to find nobody in the streets. I encountered the Israeli army, but they did not stop me. Probably they did not see the point of stopping a woman driving a Palestinian car and going through empty roads.
- 8 I got to where I needed to be, I did my interviews, the workers explained why they work in Israel or the settlements, telling me how they cannot find a job in the west Bank or how low the salaries are in Palestinian areas. In all case, they repeated that they have no choice but to work where they find work. This construction of over 3,000 flats in these settlements simply testify to the availability of work in Israeli controlled areas. Salaries are twice as high as in the West Bank.
- 9 The interviews did not last long as many had to go. Some wanted to see their friends and go and demonstrate. Others wanted to go and build their house. They are taking advantage of the fact that Israelis have holidays so that they can stay in their village and build their own house. It seemed absurd to hear these different options, to know that people can build while other are being killed, to know that Palestinians are building with their hands houses they will not live in, houses for settlers confiscating their land. But life has to go on, these workers told me. Each one has to think about his children, about remaining in this land by working for Israelis . . . Isn't this usually called Apartheid!
- 10 I had to return back to Birzeit. It was getting dark. I took the same road and saw over hundreds of kids by the Balata refugee camps in Nablus, the roads were locked with tires, old cars, refrigerators, mattresses. No one seemed armed and an ambulance was there. The soldiers were not far away in their shielded cars. I had to find another road to get home. A taxi showed me the way, it was nearly dark by then. I followed the taxi driving to Birzeit, I switched on the radio. It reported 21 persons killed in various towns of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and over 350 injured.

Sunday, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2000

- 11 Today I had to go again for my interviews in Salfite, again a town beside Nablus. I was going to meet with more workers and contractors working in Israel and in settlements in the West Bank. The day did not at all seem appropriate given the escalation after the Aqsâ massacre since Friday. The TV was filled with pictures, but they still did not have the picture of the 12 year old boy in the Gaza strip who was killed beside his father as Israelis were shooting at him. The picture is by now on all newspapers and TV screens. Apart

from the Jerusalem post, no body puts in doubts that the Israeli killed the boy and injured the father in cold blood. The Israelis were neither attacked by them nor in a crossfire.

- 12 But the day was full with such incidents. The anger is all over the country. I had to go to these interviews and my brother offered to come with me. We needed a car to move around, and somebody lent us his yellow-plated car. This means that it could be a car of somebody from Jerusalem or an Israeli. As I passed via a Palestinian town, some boys throw on me a stone thinking I was an Israeli. I was shocked but was not hurt. They apologized as soon as they realized that I was an Arab, but the car was in pretty bad shape. I had to return to Birzeit to take another car registered by a green plate, the sign of somebody living under Palestinian controlled area. The car was in pretty bad shape and this ensured that nobody would care.
- 13 Delayed by an hour, I finally could start the road to my interviews. The first set of interviews were again in Salfite, the major town facing Ariel the second largest settlement in the West Bank after Maale Adumim. Ariel has a total population of 15,000 Israeli settlers. Ten years ago it had less than 5,000. Most of the workers that built the houses in Ariel came from neighboring Arab towns including Salfite. Salfite had 5,000 dunums (1,250 acres) of its land confiscated for this settlements. It has a population of over 7,000 inhabitants today, and half of its workers are employed in Ariel or in Israel. I wanted to ask workers and contractors why they continue to work in these settlements and why they fail to find other jobs. My research is in economics, I need to get figures on why people move and work in different places. Given the context of the West Bank and Gaza this seemed absurd, but economics can also be absurd. Yet doesn't economics still determine politics and vice versa!
- 14 The road up to Nablus was empty but as I approached the town, the tires were fuming, stones and rocks were everywhere, the scenes of the TV were on the ground everywhere. The Israeli army encircled the area. We had to take another road, not a by-pass road of 165 meters wide which is only allocated to settlers. Rather it was an old road built by the Jordanians before 1967 and it was left unused for some years. It got us to the road leading to the main road of Salfite, where I needed to go.
- 15 I finally reached the town. The entrance was blocked with stones and whatever equipment can block roads, but the Palestinian police monitoring the entrance of the town let me in. I went to the employment office where workers came to take their permits to go and work in Israel. Some kindly accepted to be interviewed about their work. They told me all about why they work in Israel and how they are treated. But they were all in a rush. It is their day off and they want to go and see their families or catch up all what they have to do. I finished by 2:00 but I had to go to another place, another village which is encircled by settlements. Somebody insisted on having us for lunch. We could not refuse, and we went to eat. As we ate we watched TV and saw the clashes in Gaza, the fires being shot, the boy and his father getting trapped and killed, the anger in Arab towns of Nazareth and Um al-Fâhim inside Israel. The town where we were seemed relatively calm, but as we left it we saw boys at the edge of the hill throwing stones at Israeli soldiers in Ariel
- 16 We took another road, a back road that can lead us to Ni'lin, a village near the 1967 border separating the West Bank from Israel. It was the first time we took this road but it was a beautiful little asphalt paved ally that crossed olive terraced hills. The landscape was simply sublime in this afternoon light which throw its rays on these embracing hills

filled with hundred years old olive trees. They looked so solid and so proud, these trees. I thought that this will be a harvest year since it rained enough and the olives are plenty. The road danced as we drove passed small town and hills. The scenery was so soothing in contrast to what we saw before. My brother who was accompanying me just phoned the guy supposed to meet us to tell him that everything is calm at our end and we will soon meet him. As he shut the phone we entered a village of Nabî Sâlih and we saw four Israeli soldiers dragging a small boy of 11 years old!

- 17 I could not believe my eyes. We were literary 5 meters away from them. The fragility and violence of it all was so overwhelming. We obviously came at the “end” of “a stone throwing and an Israeli shooting scene.” The soldiers were dragging the armless boy in front of us, the women of the village were running after the soldiers asking him to leave the boy. They were bare foot, they were shouting, the other boys were behind them. The soldiers kicked and hit the boy and continued amid the fuming tires and stones. The boys of the village told us to get our car out of the way. They started shouting again, called on the women to return to the village. The soldiers were 500 meters away now, but others went round the village from the other side. The boys retreated into the village. The women hid in a house. I could see two soldiers moving through the olive groves until they came by an old house behind which they hid. This house was only 200 meters away. The soldier targeted his gun towards the crowd, yet nobody was throwing any stone. He fired, I shouted, I could not believe it. Nobody was injured but the Israeli soldier fired again. No stones were thrown. After ten minutes, the soldiers decided to leave their place. They passed by us, full of sweat and anger, their guns in the direction of the village, their steps arrogant. Five hundred meters away on the other side of the main road now blocked you could see settlers walking with their guns. The Nabî Sâlih village faces Halamish settlement to where these settlers were going.
- 18 It was too much, too real to be put in clear words, capable of transmitting the emotion of the moment, the injustice, the anger, the hopelessness. Wittgenstein, a German philosopher, used to say that “what cannot be put into words should not be spoken off.” But how can you not talk about all this, how can you not try to say what you see however limited this will be in portraying all what you see. How can you not shout, yell when you have the Israeli and American media manipulating, twisting and obliterating the daily facts and suffering of Palestinians trying to live in their land.
- 19 As I returned home the number of killed since Friday was reported at 32 Palestinians and two Israelis. It was only Sunday night !  
Monday, October 2, 2000 : Being on the Other Side
- 20 Today I had to go to Tel Aviv. Again it would sound crazy to go, but I had two very important interviews set already two weeks ago. I could not let them go. One of them was with Peace Now activists. This is one of the largest peace activist groups in Israel, and they have been known for their stand against the expansion of settlements. They have also organized a major demonstration two weeks ago in support of Jerusalem as capital of two states. The person supposed to meet with me was going to give me some data and discuss some issues.
- 21 I set out of Birzeit in a taxi again. It was the first day of work in Israel as the new year's holiday were over. Israeli troops have closed the entrance to Jerusalem from the West Bank, but the Taxi took us via another longer road. The roads were relatively empty, given that we left at 8:00 Israel time. We could still find stones and burned tires, but

finally we reached Jerusalem, Damascus gate, without much trouble. I managed to find a service taxi going to Tel Aviv.

- 22 I waited until the taxi was full. I bought the Jerusalem Post and newspapers. The former had the picture of the 12 year old boy, but said that he was killed in a crossfire. No need to say that nobody believes this by now. They also reported about the border police that was "murdered by Palestinian counter parts," and about another who was killed as he was trapped in Joseph tomb in Nablus. They maintained that the Palestinians did not allow the Israelis to come and rescue the trapped soldier. I was wondering how Haartz and the newspaper in Israel were transmitting what was going on.
- 23 The car was finally full and we could leave. Three tourists were in the car, behind me was a Palestinian who spoke Hebrew and Romanian. Beside him was a Romanian woman who seemed to accompany him. She is probably one of these foreign workers supposed to replace palestinians employed in low skilled jobs in Israel! The Palestinian started talking on the phone. He was talking to his relatives and asking them how the situation was in Gaza. He told them not to worry and to make sure that they get enough food. He said he did not know when he returns but that he had some work to do. I assumed he was an illegal Palestinian worker employed in Tel Aviv.
- 24 The car set off, racing on roads that were clear and large, built on land that once belonged to Arab villages. I thought of the contrast with the streets I used yesterday in the West Bank, less than 30 km away. We finally reached the bus station in Tel Aviv. The city was calm and relatively empty. No sign of Intifâda, no sign of worries. The weather was clear and the people like anywhere you find in Europe or America!
- 25 I finally got to Peace Now office. The person meeting me was welcoming and looked concerned. He had vivid blue eyes and a warm smile. "The situation is pretty bad over there, isn't it," he asked. "Yes," I said, wondering about this "over there."
- 26 I sat and got out my notebook. He apologized saying he has to do a conference call with people in Jerusalem since Peace Now needed to decide whether it will go and demonstrate in front of the prime minister office against the violence of the past three days. The conference call was taking place in the same office that I was sitting in. it did not last for more than 10 minutes. As it finished, I asked him what they decided. He told me that peace now decided not to demonstrate.
- 27 I was surprised. He explained that Peace Now decided not to demonstrate as it does not want to give the wrong message! "We are a peace movement and we are against all violence," he said. "We also need to be tactful . . . Besides this violence is orchestrated by the Palestinian leadership, it is not unorganized riots, since Fath, the main Palestinian PLO faction, is behind it and we cannot support it." I was wondering whether the boys I saw yesterday in the small village or the kids in Nablus or Ramallah, were being guided. Arafat would love to believe that he is in control of all these masses.  
"But guns are used and people are still going and throwing stones, this cannot be spontaneous," the Peace Now Activist continued. "This is violence and the Palestinians want to make use of these riots to gain international support again. All the world will be looking at the boy being killed in the arms of his father and the whole world again will see the underdog, and they, like always, will be on the side of the underdog. Whole months of international diplomatic effort by Barak and Ben-Ami (Israeli Foreign minister) is gone down the drain, and the Palestinians have all to gain."

- 28 The question for the peace activist was not the death and the injustice, how to stop the killing of youngsters throwing stones, how to end the occupation, or how to live in peace with respect. It was rather a question of the diplomatic loses and gains that a picture is creating. But other issues were on his mind as well "we cannot demonstrate because we do not want to open another front on Barak. The country is in riots, in the Arab towns, in the territories (meaning the West Bank and Gaza strip), and we cannot open another front and get the press to say that Peace Now is also against the Prime minister." I suppose that was he trying to tell me that Peace Now wants to show a sign of cohesiveness, of the perpetual image and fact that Jewish Israelis stick together. I suppose this is what Peace Now met by needing to be tactful!
- 29 "It does not matter who started the violence, what is important is for this violence to end, and the Palestinians have a central role in that." In Haartz of Monday 3, Peace Now put a an ad for peace. But their interpretation of peace and violence bewildered me. Their ad said "18 years after the massacre of Sabra and Shatîla, Sharon set the middle east on fire, the Palestinians are adding oil to this fire[...]" I just do not know how they dared use the memory of the Sabra and Shatîla massacre to transmit a message in which they clearly put responsibility on the Palestinians for the continuation of the violence, how they dared juxtapose this "violence" to the act of Sharon. In their view, the Israeli army, the left and the right parties, the Israeli society are simply innocent of all this.
- 30 I could not believe my ears to all what I was listening. But I was so calm that I surprise myself. At one point even I told this person that I just want to understand his position and that I was not judging him. I am obviously judging him, but this is not the main point. The core issue has been for me how these peace activists in Israel are arguing and defend peace. Another peace activist that I met two days later had the same line of arguments. "Look, he maintains the Israeli public will not only be looking at the boy killed, but also at the soldier trapped by Palestinians in Joseph tomb in Nablus and they will be infuriated at seeing that the soldier could not be saved because the Palestinians did not let him be evacuated. You see, it will be one thing for the other." He is still in a debate of an unequal argument of eye for eye and tooth for tooth!
- 31 The peace activist was comparing the death of a child under 45 minutes of shooting with that of a soldier, the killing of 39 Palestinians (this was the toll until Monday evening) with two Israeli, the massacre of Palestinian in the Aqsâ mosque with that of a border police in a claimed tomb of Joseph, which is in the middle of a major Palestinian city of Nablus. "After all, both places are holy and in both cases people were killed rather than rescued, in both cases there was fire from the enemies," he continued.
- 32 Yet there is only one difference and Peace Now does not seem to want to see it. The difference is that the people in Jerusalem were praying and not firing bullets, they were simply Palestinians and not Israelis. The life of an Israeli soldier remains more valuable than that of 39 Palestinians that have been sent by their leaders to die!
- 33 I could not think but about a dear human right activist, Dr. Ruhama Marton who created Physicians for Human rights in Israel and who has worked for over 13 years to show to the Israeli public the atrocities committed in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Most recently she won Israeli prize for Human rights, one of the most prestigious prizes in the country, for the work done over the years. She has often argued that the fundamental problem with Israeli society and with human rights in Israel is linked to the perception of Israelis of themselves. "Israelis refuse to see themselves as oppressor or as victimizers. They

continue to want to see themselves as victims who are under threat all the time. They thus perpetually enforce the image and the argument that they have to be powerful because only through this power they can survive. The basis and implication of this power is something they refuse to see.”

- 34 The peace activists, who represent the average peace loving Israeli, appears to be in this trap. The escalation has continued by now. Barak, after the failure of Paris talk on Thursday declared that “this is not Western Europe or America. We live in a tough neighborhood where there is not mercy and no second chance for the weak.”(*Jerusalem post*, 5/10/2000). He describes the Middle East as a neighborhood of a gangster character! He is still not talking about human beings wanting to live in peace and respect. The mentality of the people shooting on Palestinians throwing stones, and of those refusing to condemn or stop this act, is one of war, domination, and racism. How on earth you can have peace in these circumstances !
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**Mots-clés :** Palestine

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